

**Anthropology through Levinas (further reflections):**  
**On humanity, being, culture, violation, sociality and morality**

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*Abstract*

The philosophy of Levinas poses a challenge to anthropology. For Levinas, the ‘secrecy of subjectivity’, the absolute incomprehensibility of one individual to another, is the fundamental fact of human being. It is also the foundation of morality, and ethical system, acknowledging the irreducible mystery and integrity of individuality as preceding any claim to knowledge, any legislation of culturo-symbolic construction. This article outlines some of the major tenets in a Levinasian metaphysic. It traces their biographical origin in Levinas’s experience of the Holocaust, and their intellectual origin in a reading of the Old Testament where Abraham answers ‘Here I am’ to a divine presence of which he has no possible experience. According to Levinas, each owes to the human Other the same ‘inspired’ response as to the incomprehensibility of divinity. The article concludes by mooted a passable solution to the Levinasian challenge: a cosmopolitan anthropology that looks to write the individual life *imaginatively* while writing the human species *systematically*.

‘... [the people] who did not have the frail courage to look into our eyes, throw us a piece of bread, whisper a human word. I remember very well that time and that climate (...). Almost all, but not all, had been deaf, blind and dumb (...). I do not understand, I cannot tolerate the fact that a human being should be assessed not for what he is but because of the group with which he happens to be associated’.

Primo Levi (1996:138,143)

## INTRODUCTORY

### **I. After Auschwitz**

Emmanuel Levinas was born in 1906 in Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania. He moved to France to attend university in 1923 (while his family remained in eastern Europe), eventually settling and marrying there and acquiring citizenship. In World War Two he fought at the front for a French unit, was captured, and imprisoned in Stalag IIB near Magdeburg, a camp reserved for Jewish PoWs (their uniforms marked with JUD). He endured hard labour for five years, under constant threat of deportation to a

death camp. While his wife and daughter survived the war, the remainder of Levinas's family perished under the Nazis and their local collaborators.

Nazism uniquely made the Jews into sub-humans, Levinas wrote, no longer part of a human world, but anti-Semitism was actually typical, and imitated by all social aggression: the 'shut[ting of] people away in a class, depriv[ing] them of expression' (1990a:153). Anti-Semitism, in essence, entailed not a majority oppressing a minority, nor xenophobia, nor racism, but 'a repugnance felt for the unknown within the psyche of the Other, for the mystery of its interiority (...): a repugnance felt for the pure proximity of the other man, for sociality itself' (Levinas 1989:279). Levinas's philosophy—encapsulated in the major works, *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974)—can be seen as an attempt to formulate a response to evil and gratuitous suffering, whose paradigm was Auschwitz: 'where God let the Nazis do what they wanted' (1988a:176). The twentieth century was surely the moment when any kind of balance between human experience and the possibility of theodicy—the 'temptation' to make suffering bearable or justified, to make God innocent—was destroyed and 'evil appear[ed] in its diabolical horror' (Levinas 1988b:162). It was now incumbent on human beings to resist this temptation and to live after the death of theodicy.

But what morality might be discerned and ethical foundations mooted? This article is a further attempt (see Rapport 2015a) to follow Levinas's thinking through questions of humanity, violation and sociality so that its consequences for sociocultural anthropology might be considered.

## II. 'Here I am'

Levinas saw himself as ‘a thinker’ not ‘a Jewish thinker’, but it was also the case, he believed, that the Old Testament provided universal ethical guidance, bespeaking a universal human order independent of any religion, and commandments valid even should no salvation or reward be brought about as a result. If a truth could be said to be universal when it applied to every reasonable being, then ‘Judaism that links the Divine to the moral has always aspired to be universal’: the Old Testament may concern the Jews as a chosen People and Israel as particular, upholding a ‘position outside nations’, but such particularism is to be properly understood as ‘an ethical category rather than a historical fact to do with Israel’, and hence as ‘conditioning universalism’ (Levinas 1990a:21-2). In other words, the Bible addressed humankind as a whole and contained ethical truths valid for all human beings, all of whom should see themselves as ‘chosen’, ‘particular’ and ‘outside nations’. For Levinas, the ‘Jews’ of the Bible implicate all human beings since ‘any man truly human is no doubt of the line of Abraham’ (Levinas 1990b:99).

Following from this, a key passage for Levinas is Genesis XXII(1):

‘And it came to pass, after these things, that God did prove Abraham, and said unto him: “Abraham”. And he said: “Here I am” [*Hineni*]’.

This response, ‘*Hineni*’ (‘Here I am’), occurs at other significant moments in the Old Testament, including when Moses responds to God’s calling him from a burning bush, and when Isaiah responds to hearing God’s voice requesting an emissary. It is the way that Biblical characters respond piously to a divine call. But it must also be understood, Levinas elaborates, that according to Judaism every human being is essentially free, individual—and having no possibility of numinous experience.

Abraham, Moses and Isaiah say ‘Here I am’ to a call they hear but do not and cannot comprehend. They respond without rational warrant, without this-worldly knowledge, only by virtue of an interior certainty: they feel God’s presence as a concrete event in their personal, bodily sensorium—a revelation they witness, an ‘inspiration’—but they have no comprehension of God. Likewise, according to the Torah, the Jew—every human being, then and now—is commanded by a God s/he has no experience of and no possible knowledge of. There are only the traces of divinity to be found in the Bible, and the traditions of Biblical hermeneutics (the Talmud) upheld by scholarly communities down the centuries that have sought to testify to God’s commandments.

The Biblical passage Genesis XXII(1) is cardinal to Levinas because, as I elaborate below, he urges that every human being should feel themselves called upon—should make themselves available—to the ‘divinity’, the absolutely incomprehensible otherness, that is another human being. The key message of the Bible, its commandment, was that in the same way that Abraham ‘heard’, felt and responded to a ‘God’ he could not apprehend or comprehend (could not ‘thematise’), and responded in his freedom—without there being any explicit programme or formula concerning how this response was to be effected—so we are all as human beings (as ‘Jews’) called upon to respond to the individual human other whom we can equally neither comprehend or apprehend nor experience numinously. *It is the human responsibility to say ‘Here I am’ in the face of the human Other, their felt presence, and their need.* This is the personal morality that Levinas advocates after the traumatic horrors of the twentieth century and the basis of an ethical system. The evil of Auschwitz remains both incomprehensible and unavoidable—like God, like Otherness—but there is a performative rejoinder: ‘Here I am’. Levinas sums up:

‘The ego stripped by the trauma of persecution of its scornful and imperialist subjectivity is reduced to the “Here I am” as a witness of the Infinite, but a witness that does not thematise what it bears witness of, and whose truth is not the truth of representation, is not evidence’ (1981:146).

### **III. Being ‘dis-inter-ested’**

Levinas’s philosophical mentors were Husserl and (then) Heidegger. But studying at the University of Strasbourg, Levinas also became aware of the French tradition of Bergson and Durkheim. If Husserl’s phenomenology had introduced the idea of *horizons* of interpretation within which phenomena appear and things are known and ‘objective’ judgements are made—and hence of the intrinsic naivety of claims to objectivity—then this was commensurate with Bergson’s idea of how time represented an irreducible reality distinct from the horizons of subjective phenomenology in which human being existed. Similarly, there was an appreciation of horizons in Durkheim’s idea that the social was a spiritual order, ‘a new plot in being above the animal and human psychism’ where the individual ‘comes to be recognized and even redeemed’ (Levinas 1985a:26-7). In short, phenomenological ‘horizons of interpretation’ could translate as sociological ‘levels of being’. The subjective phenomenology of the individual was on a level distinct from that of the Other or that of God (or infinity or time or animality or evil or death); and these levels were irreducible to one another. Ego is encumbered by the phenomenology of horizons of knowledge, encumbered by all its ‘existents’: by the objects it creates, construes and dominates with its thoughts.

But the idea of levels also introduces for Levinas the possibility of hope: of a new spiritual awareness and transcendence. 'Levels' means that there are novel possibilities in the universe, that not everything in human life is necessarily regulated in advance, known or knowable. There is an escape from the horizons of culture and history, from totalitarianism.

Again, the idea of God is key here, as is that of Infinity. It was Descartes's insight that the concept of infinity actually transcends our capacity to comprehend it: we have named and brought within a horizon of thought something that exceeds our capacity to think it. We have an unmasterable relation to infinity, as we have to God: both concepts contain more than can be humanly thought or conceptualised. We can thus *imagine* levels of being we cannot comprehend or apprehend. Hence, we can hope.

Most importantly, the concepts of God and Infinity—irreducible to ourselves, to a human sameness—can teach us about the other human being that faces us in social relations. For they are *as* different, *as* irreducible, *as* other, *as* excessive. God and the Infinite, for Levinas, establish a certain kind of ideal sociality. An ethical relation to a human being that faces us is one that accomplishes concretely the formal structure of transcendence found in the concept of infinity. Yes, we are human and we are individual and we exist within horizons of knowledge but, as in the Bible, we are also assured of 'inspiration': imaginings and concrete feelings of levels of being beyond our own. We approach otherness as merely human but we can hope for more. Indeed, to be fully human, and individual, to accede to our spiritual potential, we have the duty to demand of ourselves more. The relationship with the Other—as that with the concept of Infinity—is an intentionality, a conscious attending to something that we might think we can apprehend but that ultimately 'ruptures intentionality'. The

relationship with the Other ideally ‘deposes’ the sovereign ego such that the individual ‘escapes from being’—from its cultural habituality—into a ‘dis-inter-ested’ state, undoing the condition of its own being and finally experiencing the infinite, the divine. Levinas elaborates:

‘There is an opening beyond what is delimited; and such is the manifestation of the Infinite. It is not a “manifestation” in the sense of a “disclosure” which would be adequation to a given. On the contrary, the character of the relation to the Infinite is that it is not disclosure. When in the presence of the Other, I say “Here I am!”, this “Here I am” is the place through which the Infinite enters into language, but without giving itself to be seen. Since it is not thematised (...), it does not appear. The “invisible God” is not to be understood as God invisible to the senses (...). How then does it take on meaning? I will say that the subject who says “Here I am!” testifies to the Infinite. It is through this testimony, whose truth is not the truth of representation or perception, that the revelation of the Infinite occurs’ (1985a:106).

It is my contention, to repeat, that in these strange words (strange concepts, claims and conclusions) lie an understanding of identity, sociality and morality that it behoves anthropology to come to terms with. I am not alone in this (e.g. Benson and O’Neill 2007; Throop 2010; Stade forthcoming), but having made a previous attempt at addressing Levinas’s world-view (Rapport 2015a), I want to go further, be more astute. Jacques Derrida likened Levinas’s thought to a wave crashing again and again on a beach, each time with greater insistence and to deeper effect. There are depths of



insight in Levinas that address what I would take to be anthropology's core issues: how best to *know* the human condition? how best to *represent* the human condition? and how best morally to *secure* the human condition (Rapport 2012)? I say this as someone for whom atheism is a fundamental aspect of scientific advance (including anthropological): Levinas's Judaism and the seeming esotericism of his self-expression do not obviate the insights his work contains. (I do not deem Levinas's oeuvre to be mystical in character—its first principles pronounced as givens, its argumentation *sui generis*—but empirical and rational.)

Continuing the numbered steps I have started, I shall approach Levinas's oeuvre by way of two fundamental questions: What kind of sociality precipitated the Holocaust—and might precipitate any such discrimination and violation? And what kind of sociality might negate a Holocaust?

## PART ONE: WHAT KIND OF SOCIALITY PRECIPITATED THE HOLOCAUST

### IV. Culture

Levinas lays the blame for the Holocaust—for any such oppression perpetrated on human beings—on 'culture'. This is a radical claim, since human life within culture is ubiquitous while the event of the Holocaust, in its terrible intentionality, was unique in human history. For Levinas, nevertheless, the roots of the Holocaust lie in the quotidian. He writes: 'In society such as it functions one cannot live without killing, or at least without taking the preliminary steps for the death of someone' (1985a:120).

The clue to his thinking is found in the book title, '*Totality and Infinity*'. A cultural construction of the world is a 'totalizing' one. Through systems of symbolic classification, 'all' in the 'known' world is included, assigned a place, defined and

limited. From ancient mythologies to modern philosophies, cultures habituate their members into domains of category-thinking. Such ‘mythic knowledge’ (ancient and modern) is a kind that names and classifies, seizing hold of its object and possessing it in denial of the independence—and radical otherness—of its being. Symbolic classification entails what Levinas calls a ‘tyranny of the order of the same’, a ‘mythic’ possession that is a kind of violence, denying otherness, violating identity by imposing an unjust sovereignty over it. Culture is a symbolic totality that negates the infinity of otherness, replacing it with the ‘solitude’ of sameness—as if all were knowable and categorizable in the same way, in one way.

In actuality, a culture—any culture and its structuration and politicization of identity—is merely a horizon of knowing. It may claim to be natural, it may become second nature to its members, and it may claim to be all-encompassing. But it is none of these things. In truth, the world contains infinities. And we have intimations of these, always, ubiquitously, as concrete encounters, concrete features of human life—albeit these are features we do not know and cannot know except as traces.

Notwithstanding, the totalizing—conceptualizing, categorizing, ‘thematizing’—practice of a culture works to ignore, deny and eschew any such not-knowing, and so invites in totalitarianism in various forms and degrees. ‘Totality’ is the reign of the same, the singular, where everything is a part of a whole or a case under a ‘law’—whether religious, economic or political. Under cultural totalism all is reduced in an anonymizing way and not allowed to remain itself. Culture transmutes and traduces the world into a life of masks.

It was not coincidental, then, that Heidegger sympathised with the Nazis because his idea of human being as naturally rooted in local environments, necessarily in communion with language and place, contained within it a spiritualization of

culture, tradition and mysticism that split human beings into natives and strangers, the rooted and the alien, in line with Nazism—with disastrous consequences. In other words, cultural ideologies of community and place ground sociality and ethics in notions of sameness and difference: ‘We are all the same but They are different; We are human but They are not’. The door opens to a Holocaust.

We can however transcend culture, Levinas insists, albeit that it might be a wrench. We can negate ‘the prestige of myths, the discord they introduce into ideas and the cruelty they perpetuate in social customs’ (Levinas 1990a:273). For culture, history, concept and landscape as containers of knowledge and mediators of knowledge are mythic not true. We can admit there is a ‘not-knowing’ which is essential—of the essence of reality—and fundamental to our moral being-in-the-world. Indeed, we exist and experience beyond culture, as human beings, mundanely. We mundanely have encounters that refuse integration into the identities of the same, into a culture’s category-thinking: we mundanely have encounters in which is manifest an existence that absolutely resists culture.

What is called for is the heralding of those moments when we are ‘inspired’: visited by the Infinite, the Other. These can be equally mundane, and admitting their value, allowing ourselves to be within them—to say ‘Here I am’—is *the* moral performance. ‘Herald a man freed from myths’, Levinas concludes (1990a:276).

## **V. The Secrecy of the Other and its Face**

But first, what cannot be known? Infinity cannot be known. God cannot be known. Death is a continual other to human experience. But even more proximally and mundanely, another human being cannot be known. The way in which *ego* faced by *alter* is always ‘a relationship with a Mystery’ for Levinas—a relationship ‘neither

spatial nor conceptual’, and indeed obscured by the conventional descriptive and analytic optics of culture (1989:43,48)—was the main focus of my earlier attempt (Rapport 2015a). But it must be addressed here too (in brief).

Death is an event that happens to us without our having any possibility of *a priori* knowledge. It is absolutely other, and with an otherness that we can never transcend: death remains unknowable and this otherness of death is alienating. But death also shows us that ‘existence is pluralistic’ (Levinas 1989:43), since there is no possibility of compatibility with death, or communion, or harmony or empathy. Death dislodges us from the centre of our existence and sunders our solitude.

Just as there is an abyss between life and death, so there is an abyss between individual embodied consciousnesses. Isolation ‘marks the very event of being’ (Levinas 1985a:57). Existence cannot be shared but is ‘absolutely intransitive’ and ‘without relation’: ‘I am monad inasmuch as I am’ (Levinas 1985a:59). We may attempt to elude this state through ‘terrestrial nourishments’—culture and community—but these are apparent escapes only: ‘the fact of being is what is most private’.

Social life, the relation of one individual embodiment to another, is not reciprocity then. There is no common intersubjective space. Rather, *ego*’s relations with human others possesses an exteriority that is irreducible and absolute. The other is ‘*alter*’: possessed of a dimension of separateness, or ‘transcendence’, whose interiority and secrecy *ego* can never overcome. Is the other in pain? Is the other sincere? *Is* the other as I am? One might have been misled by culture into thinking one knew—thinking the world stretched out from one’s point of vision as good and bad, the same and different, pleasurable and distasteful—but coming face-to-face with the Other, facing the Other’s absolute difference, is to discover the relativity of one’s

habitual concepts and categories. For the Other cannot be comprehended, cannot be expressed—cannot even be thought. The Other is an enigma, opaque to understanding; there is infinity to be found looking into another's eyes.

The *ego* is a naïve, wild growth and movement, Levinas elaborates, invading the world, grabbing nourishment for itself: a 'usurper', finding solace in the 'solitariness', the totalitarianism, of culture. *Ego* is happy to couch its will-to-power in the language-games of culture. But then the event of meeting otherness opens up the possibility of fundamental, transcendent experience: the awareness of truly external being where the freedom of *ego*'s consciousness, its happy spontaneity, is experienced as inhibited. Hence, the experience of the Other—a glimpse of the infinite—can also be appreciated as 'the first intelligible': a reality 'before cultures and their alluvions and allusions' and independent of historicization (Levinas 1990a:294-5). For the Other cannot be adapted to the scale of *ego*'s existence without violence, both symbolic and physical. Resisting mythic possession, the 'face' of the other thus opens up a new dimension in the perception of being, a transcendent one.

## **VI. Proximity and the Face of the Other**

Historically, 'the Jew' has played the role of the archetypally 'alien' and anti-Semitism been the paradigm of violent discrimination. The lesson in this terrible history is, according to Levinas, the necessary destruction of 'idols': the overcoming of cultures that claim the world, rooted in the piety of tradition, blood, landscape and language. Acknowledging the true mystery, the irreducible otherness, of 'the Jew' frees nature from the spell of culture. 'The way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the Other in me*, we here name *face*', Levinas writes (1969:50). *Ego* who admits to himself the awareness of *alter* 'has discovered man in the nudity

of his face' and 'breaks the system' of culture and history (Levinas 1990a:234, 1998:34). 'The face is an irreducible mode in which being can present itself in its identity' (Levinas 1990a:8).

But this discovery is not a knowledge, and 'the Jew'—the Other—remains someone to whom 'one has nothing more to say' (Levinas 1990a:54): because to know what to say is tantamount to enveloping *alter* in myth and ideology, a world of culture. While Levinas names the moral relation between *ego* and otherness as 'face-to-face', then, such a naming should not be construed as removing secrecy or reducing the mystery. There is a bodily proximity but it refuses synthesis and contemporaneousness. It even refuses a simple phenomenological definition. Just as human beings never see God, only traces of His being in the world, so *ego* never actually sees anything essentially true of the Other—the truth of his or her face or body—only traces. The face and skin that *ego* might hope to approach 'are already absent from themselves', and the face that does appear 'signifies the Infinite' (Levinas 1981:89). *Ego* only knows the encounter with *alter* as a fissure: something that breaks apart its categories of definition and appropriation. In sum, here is a proximity that coincides with no affinity and that frustrates any schematism: 'The immediacy of the sensible is an event of proximity and not of knowledge' (Levinas 1987:116).

There is proximity none the less, because the strangeness or alterity of the traces of face immediately overcomes the distance between individual human bodies. The proximate 'presence' of the Other thrusts itself on *ego* as an 'ineffaceable' strangeness. *Ego* is surprised. This fissive strangeness *must*, moreover, be recognised as a moral summons, Levinas asserts. For it signifies another life, another horizon or level of being. The mystery of the Other that cannot be known, imagined or possessed, *and that yet proves the plurality of existence*, places *ego* under an

obligation if one is to avoid the tragedy of cultural totalitarianism and its violence. As was Abraham by God in the Old Testament, *ego* is 'ordered and ordained' by the experience of the face of the Other (Levinas 1985a:97). The proximity of the face of the Other evokes in *ego* a responsibility that precedes any attempt to grasp the encounter cognitively, a responsibility of acknowledgement. This realization should provide the basis of a metaphysics in which ethics precedes ontology. That is, an ethical human sociality, one that eschews the possibility of the Holocaust, is one where an allowance for the Other's mysterious being undercuts all claims to knowledge, and undergirds all behaviour.

## PART TWO: WHAT KIND OF SOCIALITY MIGHT NEGATE A HOLOCAUST?

### **VII. Being subjectively inspired by the Other**

We have arrived at a key point in the argument. If a Biblical Abraham (and others) was 'inspired' to acknowledge the presence of a God he could not (and could never hope to) know, and responded '*Hineni*' ('Here I am'), implying 'I recognise a duty to acknowledge your presence and rights', then *ego* is equally bound by his or her humanity to respond to the Other. Otherness is there, concretely juxtaposed against *ego*'s life, as unavoidable to *ego* as is death. The face of the Other may not deliver messages in a known language—it simply 'expresses itself' (Levinas 1969:51)—and yet *ego* is bound to respond, summoned and commanded. Without properly deciphering or understanding, or even *observing*, *ego* responds to a call of *alter* that is somehow imperative. It is a command which begins in no freedom and is beyond time. Levinas famously writes:

‘Conscience is not an experience of values, but an access to external being: external being is, par excellence, the Other. Conscience is thus not a modality of psychological consciousness, but its condition, at first glance it is even its inversion, since the freedom that lives through consciousness is inhibited before the Other *when I really stare, with a straightforwardness devoid of trickery or evasion, into his unguarded, absolutely unprotected eyes*. Conscience is precisely this straightforwardness’ (1990a:293, my italics).

Acknowledgement of the Other—if ‘straightforward’ and devoid of the ‘trickery’ of a cultural construction of the world—opens *ego* up to an external reality that is beyond his or her habitual consciousness and yet which lays true foundations of a moral being-in-the-world.

But what does such ‘inspired’ acknowledgement entail? What is it to ‘respond’ to the presence of another human life that one cannot know?

Subjectivity, Levinas insists, is not reducible to the habitualities of world-view, symbolic classification and conceptualisation. (French structuralism, post-structuralism and anti-humanism are wrong, as was Heidegger, to root and immerse individual consciousness and capacity in culture.) There is a kind of sensibility born out of physical awareness of the proximate. Such proximity is experienced as an ‘urgent assignation’ *prior* to any cultural *a priori*; *ego* is sensibly ‘possessed’ by such (human) otherness prior to his or her being ensconced by the habitual language-games of a culture. There is a deep structure of human subjective experience— ‘psychism’—



that is distinct from the surfaces of cultural exchange, and it is here that *ego* responds to the Other.

This sensibility, however, is a kind of knowledge that is not ‘self-knowledge’, knowledge from *ego*’s own qualities. It is rather ‘heteronomy through and through’ (Levinas 1990a:294). The proximal encounter with the Other is a kind of ‘passion’ or ‘surplus’ or ‘anarchy’, an ‘obsession’ or ‘delirium’ or ‘trauma’, ‘a traumatism of astonishment’ (Levinas 1969:73). *Ego*’s subjective phenomenology is affected in spite of itself. Proximity to the face of the Other amounts not to a numinous experience but it is a ‘quasi-abstract epiphany’ (Levinas 1990a:295) that befalls and occupies *ego* without becoming a theme of possible representation. To repeat, the awareness by *ego* of *alter* must not be thought of as communication or communion or fusion: *alter* remains absolutely itself. Hence the encounter is ‘anarchic’ inasmuch as it entails ‘a relationship with a singularity without the mediation of any principle, any ideality’ (Levinas 1989:90).

Moreover, the ‘inspiration’ by which the Other manifests itself in subjectivity is commonplace, Levinas has insisted. Just as the Bible and its Talmudic commentary is the outcome of inspired individuals through the ages, writing as testament to the traces of divine presence, so awareness of ‘ethical truth is common’: anyone and everyone may be inspired by otherness (Levinas 1985a:115).

And yet, it seems to me that Levinas must work harder to establish this key claim—of an inspired subjective awareness of otherness—if it is not to assume the unassailable lineaments of a given, a first principle. (In other words, I do not see the paragraphs above as yet elucidating an empirical situation: how an individual becomes aware of their being faced by another, alien level of being.) Let me try to isolate the components in Levinas’s account of inspiration as follows:

- In the same way that the proximity of the Other refuses synthesis and contemporaneousness, it also refuses an ordinary phenomenology; we never actually see the face of the Other, only its trace. Otherness remains an ‘evasion’, and inspiration should not be conceived of as a deepening of knowledge, making the invisible visible.
- Nevertheless, a kind of pre-conscious sensing is possible. Inspiration is the experience of an immediacy, a disquietude, a rupture, that breaks through all encultured habit, all laws, rules, codes, rituals, roles, contexts, conditions, horizons. Inspiration describes an ethical relation that takes place at the level of sensibility not consciousness.
- This sensing is something to which the body of *ego* is subjected. Sentience of the Other is a kind of vulnerability and passivity in *ego*, an *exposure* taking place ‘on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves’ (Levinas 1981:15). The exposure may be considered ‘first of all as touch’, or ‘caress’:

‘Over the hands that have touched things (...) over all things, beginning with the human face and the skin, tenderness spreads. Cognition turns into proximity, into the purely sensible. Matter (...) obsesses me with its proximity’ (Levinas 1989:118-19).

Sentience is also an ‘obsession’—an ‘anarchy’, a ‘trauma’, ‘a disequilibrium’—because it undoes thematization, eludes principle, origin and will. Hence, what is caressed ‘is not touched, properly speaking’, not the caressing and touching that *ego* intends in the everyday worlds of culture and

habit (Levinas 1985b:89). The 'caress' or 'touch' that Levinas is calling sentience of the Other is, rather, caress by way of exposure, caress as part of a deep psychism, *at the edge* of *ego*'s nervous system. Nevertheless, the sentience is imbued with 'the intrigue of proximity' (Levinas 1981:48).

- Another way that Levinas describes *ego*'s exposure to *alter* is to say that 'the face speaks' (Levinas 1969:66). Not in a language that is comprehensible (cultural) but nevertheless with an authenticity that 'cuts across' culture, interpellating *ego*, taking it hostage, making avoidance impossible. Inspiration also concerns attending to the performative doing of the Other, then, its vocative agency: 'Hello'. To which, if inspired, *ego* responds in an acultural (non-propositional, non-reflective, non-subsumptive) way: '*Hineni*'. 'Here I am' is a kind of 'loving' caress that does not endeavour or expect to reduce the Other to logic or number, to neutralise its alterity, but allows it to 'withdraw into its mystery' (Levinas 1985a:67).
- *Ego* is not lost or imprisoned in language or defined by language, then. There is always 'an opening beyond what is delimited' in language and culture (Levinas 1985a:106). 'Hello', and 'Here I am', are thus not merely to be understood as mundane greetings or affirmations in a language-game. Rather, in such speech-acts are the beginning of an ethical relation to the Other. It is in such speech-acts that can be recognised the essence of language not as a shared system of signifiers, nor an enculturated transposition of things into referents, but as 'a semantics of proximity' (Levinas 1993:93). Before everything else, language is an address from and to the Other. To be inspired is to acknowledge this address and to respond.

- Inspiration, it seems, is a kind of pre-conscious sensing of another individual body that calls out to *ego*, that causes *ego* to be caressed at the edge of its nerves. That call is human and frail, and yet imperious: *ego* responds not out of conscious compassion, pity or sympathy but because of ‘the impossibility of evading’ an obsession, a trauma, from which there can be no indifference, only passivity and passion.
- What Levinas means can be seen, too, from the examples he adduces. Inspiration is mundane and commonplace, he claims, such that even amid accounts of the Holocaust (such as Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*) one finds, at apocalyptic depths:

‘the muffled stirrings of a persistent, invincible humanity. The “I” of men, forced by suffering back into the shackles of the self, breaks forth, in its misery, into mercy. (...) [A] primordial tenderness for the other, [a] gratuitous goodness (...) rises, before hope, from the abyss of despair, [a mercy going] from one human uniqueness to another, independent of, and as if in spite of, structures—political or ecclesiastical—in which they were exhibited’ (Levinas 1994:89-90).

### **VIII. Behaving ethically towards the Other**

Before all else, according to Levinas, *ego* must acknowledge his or her relationship with *alter*, the individual human Other, and its moral weight: *ego* should open himself

or herself up sensorially to the traces of *alter*, becoming aware of the Other's irreducible difference, also their humanity, nakedness and vulnerability. A sense of obligation is born—equally infinite—and with this moral consciousness, the beginning of the ethical relation.

But this 'sensible' encounter with the traces of an individual human other is also, in a way, the *end* of the ethical relation—its limit or extent. One might construe 'politics' as extending the ethical relation between *ego* and an individual Other to a 'society' of Others, but this conceptual move must be resisted, Levinas insists. For it is totalizing: there is no way to generalize upon the individual relation between *ego* and *alter*, and turn it into an institution, without revisiting the violence of thematizing, categorizing, defining, comparing and numbering. 'Politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself', and 'society' would thereby 'moderate' the privileged relation between *ego* and the unique Other through a contextualizing of the latter in a collective (Levinas 1969:300). Indeed, the mere intention to ground ethics in a society of equals opens the door to a Holocaust: 'We are all the same; but They are different, worse, alien'. Politics and society considered in this way—the practice of a 'total and additive sociality' where individuals are known as members of a genus, becoming like things—cannot operate 'without killing', Levinas concludes (1985a:120).

Contrary to a 'synthetic' conception of sociality, then, Levinas proposes a 'pluralistic' one respectful of human identities and freedoms. Ethical relations both begin and end with the foundational 'the secrecy of subjectivity' (Levinas 1985a:78). A pluralistic society embodies a 'collectivity that is not a communion' (Levinas 1985b:94): an ethical society, therefore, is one that 'would render justice to that secrecy which for each is his life' by basing itself on 'the principle of an absolute individuation' rather than a generalised 'people' (Levinas 1985a:81). The risk of

generalizing and ‘socializing’ relationships between *ego* and *alter* is always to be ‘held in check by the initial interpersonal relation’, and the legitimacy of the society’s habitus—its law, rationale and justice—always seen to rest on the face-to-face relation from which society derives.

However, if ‘society’ cannot ethically supervene upon the dyad of *ego*’s individual relationship to and responsibility for *alter*, then even for *ego* there is and can be no explicit programme concerning how a moral relation with the Other is to be practised. Just as there is no numinous experience, no personal epiphany of experiencing God, so *ego* should feel himself or herself commanded to be available to the Other but without formulae concerning what this means in a particular case or how it is to be done. Only in personal interiority can one look to find a moral foundation—*ego* making himself or herself available to *alter*’s needs and sufferings and vulnerability—but even here *ego* can only be guided by inspired feeling: feeling that is grounded in a face and body that calls out to him or her, but a feeling that is not sympathy or empathy, and a feeling that does not translate into a discourse of sameness or difference. *Ego* must respond to *alter* ‘recognised’ as an instance of no abstraction: *alter* is just who *alter* is, and *ego*’s response has no universal character, simply being what *ego* feels called on to do in the moment and performs with no sense of understanding and no expectation of communion or reciprocity. Levinas speaks of the inspired *ego* here exercising a ‘non-intentional consciousness’ (1997:85). While for Husserl and conventional phenomenology intentionality may have entailed a directionality towards the thing that was observed and thought—and thereby comprehended, represented, encompassed and carried away—inspiration accedes to ‘a thinking that is more ancient and more aware than knowledge’ (Levinas 2002:534). Intentional consciousness does not account for all an individual’s

‘spiritual’ energy, and ‘the human’—the surplus to the world that is ‘face’—may be regained through inspiration.

## **XI. Encouragements to inspiration**

Notwithstanding, Levinas does suggest certain circumstances that might predispose *ego* to recognise his duty of responsibility towards *alter*. One must be careful here, because there can be no social programme of formulae for inspiration (as above), and nothing that is in or of the known world (of culture and habit) can comprehend the Other or coincide with inspiration. Nevertheless, there are certain occasions or modalities of consciousness wherein inspiration is encouraged. Suffering is one such: we have heard how, ‘stripped by the trauma of persecution’, *ego* may break out in a primordial tenderness for the Other and perform a gratuitous goodness. Love is another: a kind of ideal engagement with the Other that exalts their alterity, neither ignoring the Other nor laying claim to the Other’s identity or reducing the Other to logic or number. Love, understood and practised not as a struggle to possess or fuse with or know but ‘a caress without content’ affords the Other the space to ‘withdraw into its mystery’ (Levinas 1985a:65-9). The ideal lover exercises:

‘a disinterested affectivity—or desire—in which plurality as social proximity does not need to be gathered under the unity of the One. The excellence of love and sociality [expressed as] responsibility for the neighbour [is a] a sociality which, in opposition to all knowledge and all immanence, is a relation with the Other as such and not with the Other as a pure part of the world’ (Levinas 1996:158-9).

Reason is a third such modality of consciousness. The individual who is rational, avoiding myth and doctrine in thought and practice and mistrusting enculturated tradition, exercises an ultimate freedom that maintains an inner link with truth. For the rational individual acknowledges the incomprehension and incomprehensiveness in his or her dealings with the Other, and so has recourse to those banal yet ubiquitous acts of civility, hospitality, kindness and politeness upon which can be founded civil relationships of trust. ‘Après vous, Monsieur’ could serve as a kind of summary of his entire philosophy, Levinas quipped (1985a:89). Reason—archetypically, the mathematician who bows before the evidence of absolute, homogeneous, geometric space in a ‘demystified and disenchanted world’—might herald a civilization ‘built on justice [that] unfolds in science’ (Levinas 1990a:275-6, 232-3).

Finally, technology in itself is efficacious. Often disparaged for reducing human beings to deracinated cogs in automated practice, technology is in actuality less to be feared than the spiritualization of space: espousing a supposed environmental totalism that would root (and reduce) people to members of cultural communities as natives and strangers. Technology allows humanity to wrench itself out of such a (Heideggerian) world of sentiment and superstition, with its idols of place, family, tribe and nation. Technology assists humanity in rooting piety not in landscapes and memories but in an abstract universalism, and so to ‘discover man’ and his place in the ‘economy of the Real’.

Freed from ‘the prestige of myths, the discord they introduce into ideas and the cruelty they perpetuate in social customs’, the rational human being, the lover, the sufferer has the opportunity to practice an ‘enlightened uprootedness’: ‘to perceive



people outside the situation in which they are placed, and let the human face shine in all its nudity' (Levinas 1990a:273).

## PART THREE: ANTHROPOLOGY THROUGH LEVINAS

### **The challenge of Levinasian philosophy**

What kind of sociocultural anthropology follows if one takes Emmanuel Levinas seriously? The writing and thinking are not easy to access. There is a danger that the effort to do so, and the feeling of achievement when sense is made, encourages a suspension of disbelief: rather than simply judging the content of Levinas's ideas, one is swept along as a fellow-traveller and trades critical engagement for a sense of belonging. At least I find this to be a temptation. I am still not certain I have captured the concept of inspiration: something commonplace, traumatic, obsessive, anarchic, passionate; a pre-conscious response to a call issued in a pre-cultural language; a look in the eyes and a caress that are phenomenologically concrete and yet traces.

Notwithstanding, I find Levinas's work to be highly provocative. Much of his philosophy appears to chime with the tenets of an anthropology I have claimed concerning the individuality of human embodiment, its 'secret' and private perceptions and world-views (Rapport 1993, 1994), and its 'usurpatory' power and freedom to define a life-project (Rapport 2003, 2016); also the dual phenomenology of language wherein depths of personal significance feed into superficial public expression (Rapport 1987, 1997); also the immorality of a society that categorizes its individual members as essentially representative (of cultures, communities, classes, religions) (Rapport 2012; Amit and Rapport 2002, 2012); and also the need for

science and morality alike to transcend the narrow (and often erroneous) disciplines of cultures and accede to a human civilization based on rationality, universality and a cosmopolitan politeness (Rapport 2010, 2011).

Or again, to make this claim in a less self-centred and more ‘disciplinary’ fashion, there is much in Levinas that corresponds with what anthropologists have consistently asserted—however polemically. Alongside Levinas’s distrust of culture, then, might be placed Edmund Leach’s assertion that culture is ‘an ill-defined, redundant category’—at best a ‘convenient, temporary fiction’—which, over the years, has ‘done little to clarify but much to confuse’ anthropological thinking (1989:137). Also, Michael Jackson’s insistence that ‘culture be seen as an idiom or vehicle of intersubjective life, but not its foundation or final cause’; or else, as with all collective nouns and identity terms, ‘culture’ risks suppressing, abolishing and reifying vast areas of human experience: converting experiencing subjects into known objects and ‘transmuting the open-endedness and ambiguity’ of life (2002:118-25).

Alongside Levinas’s vaunting of science and technology as liberating rationalities, might be placed Ernest Gellner’s (1995:6-8) celebrating of an Enlightenment that potentially provides a ‘liberation from want and tyranny’: depriving cultures of their mystical underpinnings and revealing them to be ‘collectivities united in a false belief’. Rationality ushers in an affluent and disenchanted condition no longer in thrall to cultural belongings that entail giving ‘assent to absurdity’. While alongside Levinas’s instinct that social life was intrinsically unethical (where claims to totalizing knowledge precede respect for individuality) may be placed Zygmunt Bauman’s recognition that society, ‘in addition, or even contrary, to its “moralizing function” may act as a “morality-silencing” force’ (1989:174). Also, Anthony Cohen’s urging that anthropology must

make deliberate efforts to ‘acknowledge the subtleties, inflections and varieties of individual consciousness which are concealed by the categorical masks which [social functionaries and social scientists alike] have invented so adeptly, [lest we] continue to deny people the right to be themselves, deny their rights to their own identities’ (1994:180).

Again, alongside Levinas’s trust in individual bodies as being the sole sites at which not only the fragility of existence but also inspired intimations of infinity may be experienced are James Fernandez’s (1992) arguments concerning the ‘phenomenological subjectivity’ and ‘personal sensorium’ in which individual minds inexorably dwell; also Ronald Stade’s (2014) focus on the absurdity, self-alienation and self-transcendence experienced by ironizing individuals whose bodies possess uniquely human capacities amid their sociocultural contextualities. And finally, alongside Levinas’s urging that politics and society be legitimated solely as scaled-up versions of individual’s dyadic relations, should be placed Herbert Blumer’s definition of society as ‘consist[ing] of acting people and the life of the society [being] seen as consisting of their actions’ (1972:186-7); also Frederik Barth’s (1966) assertion that what is social-structural and normative remains in essence something generated and maintained by individual actors making decisions that reflect their individual awarenesses and interests.

But the challenge posed by Levinas cannot be ducked. Beyond the habitual, commonsensical, conceptual and doctrinal language-world lies the human being; but *ego* only gains access to traces of another’s identity, and this through inspiration; yet it is this inexorable and irreducible ignorance that must form the basis of science and society alike: an ethical way forward entails human encounters grounded in individual secrecy. But an emphasis on ignorance would seem to suggest a radical curtailment of

anthropology, whether as science or as moral project. *What kinds of claims concerning otherness can be made, and how may these be presented?* How to proceed?

In his theory of tropes, James Fernandez emphasises the ubiquity and significance of what is ‘inchoate’ in human experience and relationships. The inchoate refers to the way that ‘identities are problematic and not precisely defined’ in social life (1982:544), and how metaphors and metonyms—all linguistic tropes—act as kinds of hypothesis brought to bear on inchoate subjects such that they might accede to more concrete treatment. Fernandez would thus shift the focus of an anthropological analysis from inchoate ignorance to how language glosses over this problematic. Michael Carrithers (2009) also treats the ‘inchoate’ of human being, and stresses how through the deployment of *rhetoric*, a cultural canopy of rituals, narratives and formulae tame chronic human ignorance, vulnerability and ‘exposure’, thus rendering the unseen and unforeseeable intelligible and operable. Anthropology may focus on these rhetorical operations.

A different approach is taken by Jason Throop, and by Anne Line Dalsgaard. Throop acknowledges the irreducible ‘exteriority’ and ‘excess’ that the unique and individual Other represents, and the ‘opaqueness’ that must characterize that relationship if we would not perpetrate the act of violence of categorizing the Other within our own frames of reference. Nevertheless, Throop (2010a:271) posits a connective ‘interhuman’ realm found in moments of wonderment that arise in the face of this mystery: those moments of disquietude, bewilderment and confusion that confronting another evokes, and those moments of empathy when we may suffer-for another and experience pain. These moments may not occur often: usually we operate within habituses that corrupt the particular living density or plenitude of the Other.

Notwithstanding, such moments represent a kind of phenomenological ‘modification’ that (fleeting) allows for moments of ‘empathetic resonance’ to arise between people (Throop 2010b:781). This is necessarily an imaginative process, calling for dialogic communication not mere projection; and communication that is not necessarily narrational or semantic; and empathy practised in the context of cultural assumptions and values. Nevertheless, human beings—anthropologists and society members alike—may thereby cultivate shared horizons of intersubjective understanding and forge genuinely human bonds beyond personal and cultural emplacements (Throop 2010b:772-3).

Dalsgaard (2017) argues for a ‘pre-textual knowing’. This derives from body-plus-emotion-plus-intellect, and provides insights that overcome the conventions and limits of cultural forms. What is revealed is the ‘disequation’ of human embodiment: the irreducible distance between bodies that is the universal human condition. But even recognizing that absence of relationship is a form of closeness notwithstanding. Standing at the bedside of a pregnant woman in Recife, Brazil, Dalsgaard is no less deeply rooted in her subjective sensorium, habits and classifications than she would be anywhere else. But surrounded by the radical otherness of such different sensory worlds is where we can reach out towards one another. And while this engagement will not vouchsafe an empathetic understanding of the primary experience of ‘I am’, it may give rise to a mutual ‘We can’.

While acknowledging the fundamental—foundational—inchoation, opaqueness and disequation of human being, Dalsgaard, Throop, Carrithers and Fernandez, in their different ways, travel quite far from Levinasian beginnings, promoting anthropologies of discourse, intersubjectivity and collaboration. I shall end by suggesting another response to the Levinasian challenge.

### **A solution to the Levinasian challenge?**

In an overview of the work of Levinas, Simon Critchley (2008:27-8) draws on a distinction of Stanley Cavell's concerning two kinds of moral philosopher: 'legislators' and 'moral perfectionists'. While Rawls and Habermas may be examples of the former, providing precepts, rules and principles, Nietzsche and Mill exemplify the second, positing fundamental existential truths that transcend codes. Levinas is also in this latter company: he would discern the 'perfect' foundations of human being.

This puts me in mind of what Rodney Needham (1978:75-6) called his 'counsel of perfection' for anthropology. Needham urged anthropologists to reassess their tasks, their standards and their ambitions and aspire to something possessing the humane significance of metaphysics and art: ethnography and analysis may achieve the imaginative acuity, humane insight, even literary artistry, of George Eliot, Dostoevsky, Gorky, Woolf. This might seem a strange comparison—anthropologist as novelist—but I have argued elsewhere for its appositeness (Rapport 1994). What I return to here is Needham's affection for George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans (1819-1880)), author of what many have acclaimed as the greatest novel in the English language: *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1872). Eliot's writing combines psychological insight with compendious social analysis and also a moralizing political vision. Her work covers modernisation and change, political reform, provincialism, status, chance, money, love, family, religious belief, hypocrisy, education, self-determination, idealism and Zionism. But one feature of *Middlemarch* is particularly pertinent here: Eliot's appreciation of what she calls 'the hidden life'. The celebrated closing sentence is:

‘The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs’ (1994:688).

Even stronger is this assertion of the ordinariness of what is other—should we have the means to recognise it and to accommodate it:

‘If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity’ (1994:185).

‘The roar on the other side of silence’ conjures up well for me the claims made by Levinas for the existence of what is incomprehensible, and also Eliot’s desire to bring this to her readers’ attention. For that roar is real and existentially consequential.

Some sixty years after *Middlemarch*, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary that she wished her writing to catch ‘the feeling of the singing of the real world’ and to forswear the ‘silence [of] the habitable world’ (1972:148). But it was E. M. Forster who explicitly articulated Eliot’s legacy. ‘Mutual secrecy [is] one of the conditions of life upon this globe’, he wrote (1984:57), but what distinguished the novelist—and what made the novel ‘truer’ than social science—was that the novelist imagined a command over the secret life that escaped the external evidence of words and gestures. It was the pride of the novelist, Forster asserted (1984:69-70), to provide

testimony of human interiority and the power of the novel convincingly to evoke ‘the beyond’ that each reader knew from experience to exist. I have argued in the past and I would argue again here that anthropology need not accept the limitation that Forster would impose upon social science: part of the solution to the secrecy of subjectivity, the incomprehensibility of *alter*, the inchoate, is *anthropologically* to imagine the inner life of the individual other (Rapport 2008).

But this is not the entire solution: to become ‘novelistic’. For alongside Levinas’s emphasis on the irreducible mystery and integrity of individuality is his humanism: his recognizing the universality of human being and insisting on the dignity of its intrinsic nature. At the core of the evil of Nazism was its work of classifying Jews as their own distinct species, denying any universality. ‘Humanism’, Levinas explicated (1990:277), signified to him ‘the recognition of an invariable essence named “Man”’, and an affirmation of the central place occupied by this essence ‘in the economy of the Real’ and in the engendering of value. ‘Humanism’ covered respect for the person—for self and Other—and the necessity of safeguarding its freedom; but also, a blossoming of human nature—freed from the prestige of myths—as might be expressed in scientific intelligence, artistic creativity and quotidian self-expression. (The State represented the highest achievement of the West, Levinas opined (1990:216), since its sovereignty afforded space, a personal preserve, where the citizen might be free and exercise their will.) After Levinas, it is the role of anthropology, I say, also to write a science of the species: what it is to be human. Hence, a distinct, dualistic enterprise: ‘anthropology’ is to do creative justice to the uniqueness of individuality *and* to do systematic justice to the commonality of humanity.



To write the uniqueness of individuality alongside the commonality of humanity is to combine two very different, even contrary, epistemologies and genres of expression; there is no perfect solution to Levinas's moral-perfectionistic demands. But this rises to the challenge: here is a 'cosmopolitan' anthropology that endeavours to juxtapose the '*cosmos*' of human species-wholeness against the '*polis*' of an individually embodied life, and to bring these together in one stereoscopic viewing (Rapport 2012). There is the unique individual *substance* of a life; and there is the universal human *capacity* that guarantees that life's unique integrity, freedom and dignity: with one hand anthropology writes imaginatively the individually substantiated life that exists on the other side of silence; with the other anthropology writes systematically of a human nature that universally capacitates that individual existence (Rapport 2015b). Not novelist as such; not biologist. The anthropologist would hope to do justice to individual research subjects by writing in such a way that the style, the structure and the content reflect an experience of that unique otherness: one does not write after a formula or a precedent; one fashions an oeuvre to respect the traces of the Other intimated by the 'inspired' way one hopes to have gone about one's fieldwork. Equally, the anthropologist would hope to add to the fund of scientific data concerning the nature of human embodiment. In order to exist as a human Other—agential, discursive, naked, needy, vulnerable, individual—certain universal capacities must have been operationalised. What were these? What distinguishes *alter* from other animal forms, and from inorganic life?

It is managing the contrariety of these very different enterprises—imaginative *and* systematic—that characterizes anthropology after Levinas (Rapport 2005).

## **Coda**

Years after returning from Auschwitz, Primo Levi found his fellow-inmates still invading his memory, begging for survival through ‘the ambiguous perennial existence of literary characters’ (1996:10-11). Levi had forgotten nothing, he found—faces, sensations, events, words (even in unknown tongues)—as if his mind ‘had gone through a period of exalted receptivity’.

Even in the briefest of writing, I find, Levi succeeded in performing the ‘anthropological’ duty of moving authentically between the imaginative and the systematic, the individual and the human:

‘For [Alberto], renunciation, pessimism, discouragement were abominable and culpable: he did not accept the concentration camp universe, he rejected it both instinctively and with his reason, and he did not let himself be tainted by it. He was a man of good and strong will, and miraculously he had remained free, and his words and his acts were free: he had not bowed his head, he had not bent his back. A gesture of his, a word, a smile had a liberating virtue, they were a rip in the rigid fabric of the *Lager*, and all those who had contact with him felt this, even those who did not understand his language’ (2000:118-19).

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